



Pick Your Path to Health

Myths about Birth Control

Throughout history, little was known about women's reproductive system and what was believed was rather strange. Hundreds of years ago, when a woman was in labor, she was told to put a knife under the bed to cut the pain. And not many years ago, many believed that when a woman had her period, her touch could sour milk.

Well, it's the 21st century. And women today are way beyond those myths, right? Well, not completely. We still get a lot of misinformation from well-meaning sisters, friends, and others, and when it comes to birth control, misinformation can cause big problems. Here are some common beliefs about birth control.

Myth number one. You can't get pregnant if you have sexual intercourse during your menstrual period. And, you can only get pregnant during the middle of your menstrual cycle.

Fact. While you are most fertile and likely to get pregnant in the middle of your menstrual cycle (about two weeks after your last period when you ovulate or produce an egg), it is possible to get pregnant anytime, even during your menstrual period, because sperm can live up to 5 days in women. Also, many women ovulate earlier or later in their menstrual cycle which will shift the time they are more likely to get pregnant.

Myth number two. You can't get pregnant while breastfeeding.

Fact. Yes, you can. In general, most women will not ovulate and menstruate while they are regularly breastfeeding their baby every day and their baby is getting most, if not all, of his or her nourishment from breastmilk. But, eventually the body starts to go back to its prepregnancy state and will begin to produce eggs again even while breastfeeding. However, the woman may not know this has happened until she has a menstrual period. So, she can be fertile and become pregnant without realizing she can.

As a general health tip, most doctors recommend that a woman wait at least a year after giving birth to let her body recover before becoming pregnant again.

Myth number three. You can't get pregnant if the man pulls out before ejaculating.

Fact. Not true. Even before a man ejaculates, a small amount of lubricating fluid is released which can contain sperm. So any penetration of the vagina by the penis can cause pregnancy.

Myth number four. Douching after intercourse can prevent pregnancy.

Fact. No. Douching or bathing immediately after intercourse has no effect because the sperm have already traveled up toward the egg.

Myth number five. You can't get pregnant the first time you have sex.

Fact. Any girl who has started menstruating can get pregnant, regardless of her age. Also, teenage girls are generally quite fertile and are able to become pregnant more easily than older women.

Myth number six. If you use oral contraceptives (birth control pills or the "pill"), they will prevent pregnancy and protect you against sexually transmitted diseases (STDs).

Fact: Although "the pill" is an effective method of birth control when used correctly, no method of birth control, except abstinence, is 100 percent effective. Many of today's contraceptives can usually prevent unintended pregnancy, but nothing, not even sterilization, works all the time for all people. It is important that whether you use something the doctor prescribed or something purchased over-the-counter, you should follow the use instructions exactly.

Also, the only contraception that offers some protection against STDs-including HIV/AIDS-is latex condoms. Even the condom is not foolproof-for pregnancy or STD prevention.

The truth about birth control

Many women and teenage girls have unintended pregnancies-according to government statistics, about half of all pregnancies are either mistimed or unplanned. In general, many of these pregnancies occur when birth control was not used, or used incorrectly. So, here are some suggestions on birth control use.

- Abstinence is the only 100 percent foolproof way to avoid pregnancy.

- A condom is the only way to protect against sexually transmitted diseases, unless you are in a very long-term monogamous relationship, use a condom.
- Birth control pills and injectable and implantable contraceptives are quite effective in protecting against pregnancy. However, the pill must be taken regularly, and the injectable and implantable methods are effective only for a certain length of time, and need to be replaced regularly. Ask your doctor or staff at the clinic the correct way to use birth control.
- Know yourself and your partner. If you are sexually active and forget to take your birth control pills on a regular basis, consider using a hormonal implant or injectable form of birth control that you don't have to think about every time you have sex.
- If it is difficult to plan ahead, condoms are a reliable form of birth control, but it goes without saying-they don't do any good when left in a handbag or pants pocket. Also, never reuse a condom. Using a vaginal spermicide jelly or foam with a condom provides even better protection against pregnancy.
- Consider sterilization-tubal ligation (having your tubes tied) or a vasectomy for the man-if you do not plan to have more children. Sometimes these operations can be reversed but it involves expensive surgery and there is no guarantee it will work.

Remember that it only takes one mistake to get pregnant or to get a sexually transmitted disease. Don't let a partner talk you into unsafe sex practices, and you'll be on the path to a lifetime of good health.

Pick Your Path to Health is a national public health campaign sponsored by the Office on Women's Health within the U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services. For more information about the campaign or to request weekly health tips by e-mail, call 1-800-994-WOMAN or TDD at 1-888-220-5446 or visit the National Women's Health Information Center at <http://www.4woman.gov>.